



To the Roots Family,

I may very well be wrong.

A sentiment that may too aptly capture the state I've been entrenched for the past several months - a paradox to be convicted and yet, conflicted, in a sea of hearts and minds and ancestry and future souls. As an extension of this, I've started and deleted this letter too many times to count.

But here goes.

I may very well be wrong. I just hope for the sake of our children, that I'm not.

I write this to share my best *and worst* articulation of the state of our school, and of a decision that I've made and proposed and along the way, have learned a great deal from. I write this to reaffirm my personal perspective, my opinion, and my best evidence to support my reasoning and conclusions.

Anyone, I believe, is entitled to at least their opinion. I own the fact that mine happens to come with the authority and power of that a Principalship, which means that sometimes it's not just opinion, it's an act.

I must start with a clarification: To me, this is not about privatization, or school closures, or board politics, or career mobility. To me, this too, is about equity, about quality of life, of the burden of information and data, and of the speculation and inferences that comes there with it. To me, this is and has always been about Roots International Academy, the children of Havenscourt and East Oakland.

I'm relying on three primary sources to inform my position — **that Roots International Academy should close and close this year rather than take on a one-year phase out;**

- First, my experiences as a teacher, dean of students, and Principal at Roots International Academy for the past 10 years.
- Second, as a holder of metrics, data, and information provided my work and role in OUSD as well as an observer of outside community organizations like the OPEN Network.
- Lastly, my heart. Fallible as it may be, it beats strongly to my own tune of justice, and to it I submit that I can only listen and try my best to act. As an advocate, as a servant, act.

I am very much aware that of my reasons listed, none have spoken directly to community voice and input — a strong argument elevated by many to illustrate how this conversation about communities is happening absent of community — and to that, I concede. The act in and of itself is disenfranchising. Work of the oppressor. As a named value of not only myself but of our school, we as an institution have failed in living out this precept.

And yet, whether it's community engagement, population demographics or even teacher retention—perspectives which have been used as focal points in the argument that we are simply not looking deep enough, I see in our lineage—matters of failure, that have existed almost as long as our program, undermined by processes deep beyond our control.

I believe this historic and systemic dysfunction, whose primary casualty is and has been, community—if allowed to go on unaddressed will continue to obstruct and marginalize young people and families throughout our neighborhood and across our city. The decision to close Roots as a result, and *in this way*, as unconscionable as it may sound, is part of a classic machiavellian tension of the democratic process. Ends

and means. Roots has been part of a long, beautiful and tumultuous journey. So much so that our current disposition may be traceable to some of our earliest origins.

And so it is for the circumstances of our past and the projections of our future that I find it urgent and imperative now to disrupt this, **our status quo**—a status quo that perhaps born out of good intention has morphed into a fragmented system beyond, *given what we know*, possible and probable repair. It is my belief that as long as we remain this way, we are complicit in this broken system. Whereas to act creatively, we can still disrupt and ensure our current students and future students get the best of what we as adults can offer.

What I know; I know where we come from.

**Roots International Academy is a resilient community, staffed by some of the hardest working educators for East Oakland's brightest youth.**

Unfortunately however, due to over a decade of district mismanagement and an absence of adequate support, Roots has experienced significant staff and leadership upheaval, turnover, and instability that continues to place and compound stress on developing and maintaining sustainable systems of equity and quality.

*A Roots Timeline*

1. *13 Years ago; As part of the small schools movement across the city of Oakland in 2006, the former historic Havenscourt Campus is split into two new sites, Roots International Academy and Coliseum College Prep. Brandee Stewart, a black woman, would take on Roots as a new Principal. Aaron Townsend, a white bilingual man, CCPA. Enrollment patterns follow.*
2. *After 4 years of programming, Roots loses its founding Principal and Assistant Principal as part of the School Improvement Grant, in exchange for significant funding. Conversations of closing Roots begin.*
3. *A year and a half later, Roots loses its second Principal and administrative team following the spring break recess. Teachers lead the school. Questions mount regarding the viability of restoring stability to campus, in spite of huge financial injections and investments.*
4. *Over the next 3 years, Roots would see and lose 3 more Principals and leadership teams. Narratives of Roots as an unstable and failing school persist and permeate.*
5. *During the course of this time, Roots experiences an average staff turnover greater than 50% annually. Diminishing enrollment leads to annual programmatic shifts.*
6. *2015; the district proposes to close Roots by 'merging' populations with the Frick Campus. With unclear logistics, design, a new Superintendent, and a vocal staff community, the plan collapses.*
7. *In the last 3 years, Roots dramatically improves its average adult retention, with more than 75% of core staff returning each year. A new narrative emerges, despite the continuing pattern of declining enrollment.*
8. *Nevertheless, to this day, Roots has the lowest proportion of experienced teachers than any other middle school program in the district. Less than a quarter of Roots teaching staff is tenured (typically, more than 3 years teaching)*
9. *Roots consistently scores among the lowest in district and state metrics, particularly:*
  1. *Lowest ELA SBAC scores of any middle school site, including for African American students*
  2. *Lowest Math SBAC scores of any middle school site, including for African American students*
  3. *Has currently the highest suspension rate of any middle school site, more than double the middle school network average*

Roots' standing in the district machine is the result of a frayed organizational system that stagnated the program in its very infancy and left it to then compound dysfunction. Where equity may have looked like

additional, intentional, and robust supports and resources to grow and sustain teachers, staff, and leadership, it came in waves of funding with absent oversight that ended up pushing out more than it pulled in. As a result, programs suffer and Roots becomes one of the lowest demanded schools in the district. CCPA meanwhile, experiences long stretches of stability and eventually, even growth. *A Principal and leadership team of 8 years. A strong, enduring teaching community.* The majority of students who don't get accepted to CCPA due to their limited seats don't choose Roots either—in fact, they choose charter.

Projections of a bleak future for OUSD schools; I know where this is going.

- Diminishing demand and enrollment projections continue to put programmatic sustainability and quality at risk. Roots currently has the lowest demand rate of any site in the Middle School Network (32%), which means it is the last to be filled. Given district predictions and predictions of reduced enrollment across the city and per site for the next 5 or so years, Roots is most vulnerable to suffer impacts of reduced enrollment and quality of program, i.e. funding, personnel, and structural integrity.\*

If Roots were to experience a prolonged surge in funding and resource, and **specifically in an effort** to properly grow and sustain a group of adult staff and support, then likely, a path for rewriting and transforming programmatic quality could be feasible. Its undeniable even, that we are on our way already. Nonetheless, the current (and historical) climate of the district provides no indication that necessary commitments and or assurances are possible or likely. In reality, most figures and decisions point to the contrary. Roots and Roots students are on the path to receive less. *Less students, less funding, less support.* This is not equity.

I believe therefore, that our call to action must reflect our current reality. The next set of years will be challenging for our city and in particular, for our kids and community. As a school that has historically been on the margins of much needed attention and priority, we have an opportunity to be in front of this city-wide shift and transformation. I believe with the right amount of care and intention, each of our 102 neighborhood students will be able to find a school that can support such a transition and provide a level of academic and social emotional opportunity equal to if not in excess of our current offerings. Maybe not in the Roots way, but ways that are still dignifying and compassionate of who our children are. And though we can't guarantee that all students will absolutely be better off attending another school, I believe we still have a responsibility to advocate for such an option knowing their likely fate here.

I say this because though I may not believe in the current state of all Oakland systems, I have and will always believe in the potential and power of Oakland teachers.

As someone who may in fact be the most culpable for the conditions in which we find ourselves, I can understand the impossible task that requires us to separate this predicament with our own individual personhood. This work is extremely personal. I feel I must say that an under-enrolled populace does not correlate to an unengaged staff. And that under-performing test scores do not reflect a body of under-performing thinkers, planners, facilitators, or problem-solvers. To be robbed of our beautiful song only as we're finding our voice to sing it; these are the pains and knots that are inextricably tangled now within the Roots narrative -- that anyone who walks a day in our shoes through these hallways knows deeply and intimately, fervently, and passionately. The Roots movement is special. Our kids are special. Our family is special.

This is why even through discord, we find it within ourselves time and time again to love. Why throughout surmounting uncertainty and confusion, we rise to bring focus to our classrooms each and every single day. And why even through fundamental disagreement, I commit to and encourage us all to; keep talking, keep listening, and keep moving. For me, the outcome of these next few weeks is just as important as how we move forward. In closure or otherwise, we must be prepared to hold, set up, and support our community as the first line of culture-setters. For the burden and privilege of being adults rests on us no matter what side of

the line we find ourselves on -- We build and model the world we want to see. We build and model the world we want to live in.

We are Roots. We Grow.

In solidarity and in love,



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\*\*\*\*Impacts of demand and diminishing enrollment

- Enrollment dictates FTE teacher allocations. For every 32 students, schools receive approximately (1) teacher.
- Systematically, grade sizes beginning at and within increments of 64 (2x 32 student cohorts) allow for maximization of teacher caseload. (Where teachers can teach either core or single subjects with minimal preps or teaching assignments).
- The more distance from 64, the more incongruent teacher allocations become, as well as teaching caseloads. Grade levels at 76 students for example will receive an allocation of 2.3FTE (Full time employees), which starts to pull resources away from other teaching assignments or forces teachers to take on more preps (3 subjects here, 1 subject there).
- Over time, or from year to year as enrollment shifts, teachers and staff will be vulnerable to experience instability of teaching assignments and possibly even loss of employment at sites. A school with 275 students one year will have a different allocation of teachers as it is reduced to 220 the following year. Roots is currently experiencing and projected to draw these numbers. It has also experienced reduced enrollment for the last 3 years.
- Variability in program breeds instability across programs, staff longevity, and thereby, future sustainability, returning and affirming a cycle of dysfunction.

## Additional Resources & Information:

1. REVIEW: ROOTS [CASE MANAGEMENT PLAN](#)

2. FROM CCPA: [‘WHY CAN’T CCPA TAKE ALL OR MANY ROOTS STUDENTS?’](#)

3. FROM CCPA: [BLACK STUDENTS & CCPA](#)

4. ROOTS DATA RELATIVE TO MIDDLE SCHOOL NETWORK (BELOW)

School	Enrollment	AA	Latino	ELA (Distance from Meeting)	Math (Distance from Meeting)	Math AA	Permanent Employee	Demand Rate	Suspension Incidences
Bret Harte	592	34%	36.80%	-90.5	-126.5	-164.8	56%	51%	44
CCPA	211	11%	83%	-38.8	-81.2	-116.2		223%	12
Claremont	486	28.20%	20%	0.9	-16.5	-99.6	64%	108%	15
ECP	361	28%	64.30%	-80.1	-129.4	-148.4	63%	60%	23
Edna Brewer	805	25.20%	19%	3.2	-21.5	-89.3	64%	225%	13
Frick	227	40.10%	52.40%	-126.3	-170.1	-160.1	46%	55%	39
Greenleaf	171	8%	83%	-31.5	-45.2	-97	NA	156%	X
Life	196	5%	84.80%	-63.1	-116.2	-150.8	NA	229%	X
Madison Upper	333	16%	80%	-82.3	-118	-128.8	NA	112%	36
Montera	725	32.40%	22.30%	-31.4	-73.2	-141.1	59%	100%	37
Roosevelt	567	17.50%	36%	-73.4	-91.2	-162.9	41%	78%	13
Roots	268	34%	54.10%	-112.3	-173.8	-188.8	24%	32%	50
UFSA	371	17%	69.30%	-89.8	-127.3	-176.3	45%	41%	42
UPA	373	5.60%	86.10%	-61.5	-97.2	-146.3	54%	80%	22
Westlake	205	50.20%	26.20%	-105.4	-157.5	-177.9	33%	65%	24
West Oakland	313	59.50%	19%	-105.3	-143.7	-151.5	33%	74%	30